

Understanding Anal Glands and Sacs

While sacs and secretions may be unpleasant topics, understanding how your pet's anal glands function can help you address potential health issues. Below are some common questions we receive. Be sure to follow up with your veterinarian if you need more information on any of these symptoms or conditions.



What are anal glands?

In both dogs and cats, anal glands line the anal sac. They are located on each side of the anus, just under the skin. The glands produce a foul-smelling substance that collects in the anal sacs, and normally empties through a small tube as your dog or cat defecates. Anal glands serve the purpose of scent marking.

What do I need to know about anal sacs?

It is normal for the anal sacs to empty from time to time. The best way to clean your dog or cat after this occurs is to use a baby wipe. Sometimes under stress, your pet may empty his or her anal sacs—this is especially true for cats.

When should pet owners be concerned about anal glands?

Scooting, licking, and a consistently foul smell could indicate a problem with your pet's anal glands. Anal sac problems are particularly common in small dogs. Dogs with certain skin conditions or allergies to food/environmental allergens (pollens, grasses, dust mites) also tend to have more anal sac problems.

What are some disorders that can occur in the anal sacs?

Anal sacculitis is an infection of the anal sac. Usually the culprit is yeast or bacteria. After performing a cytology test, your veterinarian may send samples to a diagnostic lab, to culture the bacteria and determine the best type of antibiotic for treatment.

Sometimes treatment involves flushing the sacs and infusing them with antifungal or antibacterial medication. This is done under sedation or anesthesia. If your pet seems to get recurrent anal sac infections, there could be another underlying cause, such as an allergic disease.

Anal sac abscess is a condition where an infection has occurred and was not able to drain from the normal opening of the anal sac in the rectum, likely because of a blockage or impaction. Usually, your pet will need to have both glands flushed, using a special catheter, while under anesthesia. Your pet will also likely need a course of antibiotics, pain medication, and regular warm compress therapy at home.

Anal sac impaction is a condition where the anal sacs cannot empty on their own. Your veterinarian may need to manually express the glands via a rectal examination, and may recommend flushing the glands as well with a sterile saline solution and a special catheter.

Cancer of the anal sac is another potential concern. Older female dogs are at the highest risk. It is very important that your veterinarian perform rectal examinations of your older pet, on a regular basis, to screen for this type of cancer.

What can I do to help my dog with anal sac disease or problems?

Some dogs have over-active anal glands, and may get relief from regular expression of the anal sacs to reduce the buildup of pressure. If your dog is a candidate, we can show you how to do this externally. We recommend trying this when your pet is in the bathtub.

Changing your pet's diet to increase the bulk of the stool may also help the sacs express normally during defecation. Ask your veterinarian if your pet is getting enough fiber. He or she may recommend a prescription diet high in insoluble fiber, a premium light formula, or the addition of a fiber supplement—such as Metamucil—at each meal.

If my dog or cat does not really need the anal sacs, can they be removed?

Surgical removal is certainly an option. We recommend surgical removal especially for dogs that have had two or more anal sac abscesses or multiple infections. As this surgery carries the risk of anal incontinence, we recommend that it is performed by a board-certified specialist surgeon.